

Southeast Iowa stakes claim to greatness

New program to promote state's special locations

By **MATT MILNER**
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OTTUMWA — A lot of communities in Iowa think they're great, and they're looking to the state to confirm it.

The Iowa Great Places initiative, a program begun by Gov. Tom Vilsack, aims to bring state resources to bear in efforts to promote special locations. The partnerships promote three pilot places as magnets for economic, tourist and social growth.

The easiest way to find the three pilot locations was to solicit applications. The plan was that, once the applications came in, the state would work with each applicant and find the three best suited to the pilot program.

Simple, right?

Things got complicated fast. The applications, euphemistically called invitations, poured in. The initiative's official Web site lists nearly 150 neighborhoods, cities, counties, villages, districts, conceptual programs and regions. Every one of them wants a shot at the pilot program.

The applications come from every corner of the state. Southeast Iowa is well represented. Ottumwa, Oskaloosa, Fairfield, Lucas County, Bonaparte Pottery, Historic Hills, Albia, Maharishi Vedic City, Keokuk County and the Villages of Van Buren County all sent in their applications.

Initiative Spokesman Jeff Morgan said every applicant is now receiving a coach from a state agency. Those coaches will help put together a plan for presentation to the state. Three will be selected.

"It challenges state agencies and Iowans to develop new partnerships," Morgan said. "They're going to be places that create unique experiences."

David Thebodo is the point man for one of two Fairfield

applications. His involves the New Chicago district, while the other focuses on a Creative Economy Theme Park.

"First of all, we're interested in the coaching," he said, "finding out what help the state can give us. Our project has several components. We're developing the property behind, right behind Taco John's we have all the railroad cars there. We're developing them. Some cars will be used for retail shops, there will be an ice cream shop and there will be some others."

Another component is construction of a hotel with a small water park inside. The goal is to create a unique location for tourism and shopping, with a particular appeal to train enthusiasts.

New Chicago forms another part of the project. It once housed thriving rail commerce.

"There was a railyard there, and it was kind of the area, there was a stockyards at one time, there was sort of the agribusiness area," Thebodo said. "It was just a real unique area, a working-class area."

Stores around the railyards and stockyards served both residents and the railroads. A clockmaker serviced the clocks used by the railroads and covered sidewalks were a unique aspect of the area.

A rail line still links the two sections that Thebodo's group focuses on. One concept uses a passenger train to link the two for tourists and shoppers. The initiative dovetails with efforts that were already underway, potentially bringing state backing to the efforts.

Ottumwa's invitation is a little less specific. It mentions downtown housing and the city's bike trails as focus areas, but the door is left open for a wide variety of options. Tim Schwartz signed Ottumwa's invitation.

"It's two different things that we're going to be looking at. One is trying to expand our trails system and another is trying to develop housing downtown. So, those two things specifically are kind of engineered into the letter. What we'd like to do is enhance the



north side of the Des Moines riverbank," Schwartz said.

Green space is the key to that effort. Much of the city's south bank is occupied by the northern sections of Ottumwa Park and the trail that runs atop the levee. That gives the area an aesthetic signature that the north bank generally lacks.

Schwartz said initial overtures have already been made to the city, chamber of commerce and schools about the initiative. He said community-wide cooperation is key. Three sites will be selected as pilot locations but there's nothing to say the program won't expand. Ottumwa could win out as a pilot location or as an expansion. Schwartz added that there is a benefit in gathering the information and planning regardless of whether or not Ottumwa makes the cut.

"It's a terrific program that's being done," Schwartz said. "There's 145 invitations so there's a range of all different types of invitations. We can create our own kind of statement."

An existing state program plays a central role in Ottumwa's invitation. Schwartz said there is a benefit to the state in bringing a program to Ottumwa that could enhance the attractiveness of Bridge View Center.

"The local group that we've gotten together is just people that have been interested in trying to improve, enhancement of the city," Schwartz said

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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Area invitations for the Great Places Initiative

Bonaparte Pottery
Chariton/Lucas County
Fairfield
(Creative Economy)
Fairfield
(New Chicago)
Historic Hills
Keokuk County
Maharishi Vedic City
Monroe County
Oskaloosa
Ottumwa
Villages of Van Buren

For the complete list, go
to <http://www.culturalaffairs.org/greatplaces/>

"There's 10 or 12 people that helped create this initial invitation. We're not trying to keep a secret here, this has just kind of developed."

Communities who want to participate now have about two months to find a way to impress the state. Morgan said presentations will take place in September, with a decision expected by the end of the year.

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